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## The Christian Marathoner: Athletic References in Paul's Epistles

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### ABSTRACT

When the Apostle Paul came to Corinth, most likely in the year 50 AD, Corinth had regained its cosmopolitan importance after its destruction by the Romans in 146 BC. Once again it was a prominent and flourishing commerce city. Its bustling population developed the city and its port to be a vital connecting link between Italy and the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. After a century of virtual abandonment, Corinth's Isthmian Games were once again celebrated in the same festive manner as they had been in the past. Since Paul, on his first visit remained in Corinth for eighteen months, as indicated in the book of Acts of the Apostles, he must have been present at the Isthmian Games held in the spring of 51 AD. This experience, as well as those of his own youthful Hellenic and Judaic educational upbringing, gave Paul the opportunity to re-acquaint himself with pagan rituals and use athletic images to spread his evangelical message. Although there is no documented evidence that Paul was an athlete, this qualitative analysis of Alexandrine Greek text, which Paul used to write his epistles, as well as archaeological evidence, points out Paul's usage of many athletic/sport related references (words) in spreading his evangelical message. In the arena of Christian spiritual contests, Paul was an exceptional Isthmian "athlete".

**Keywords:** Epistolography, Evangelism, Hellenism, Sport.

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### 1.0 Introduction

Paul went to Corinth, most likely in the year 50 A.D., and remained there for nearly eighteen months. By contrast his visit to Athens was short. Why were his attempts to convince the Athenian Stoics and

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Epicureans, as eager as they were to listen, not successful? When success is based on the number of converts, Paul did not change the Athenian minds and hearts. A few, among them Dionesios and a woman named Damaris, approached Paul and believed. Several asked him to come back the next day. He did not!

Why was Paul's evangelical message not as productive in establishing a Christian *ἐκκλησία* = community in Athens as it was in such places as Thessaloniki, Philippi, or Corinth? There are more than seventy names that Paul mentions in his epistles recruited from these and other cities assisting Paul in his efforts to spread the "good news," but hardly any from Athens. The message was "always" the same! Paul stressed the Cross-Resurrection of Jesus, Christ's imminent return, and God's judgment. Worshiping idols would not bring salvation. It required *μετάνοια* - change of one's heart, belief in Christ. Perhaps the delivery of the message needed modification. To the erudite Athenians his "symphonic" notes were not well harmonized to their intellectual ears; however, the "rock-and-roll" sounds of athletic metaphors-images were most familiar to ordinary men and women. An analysis of Paul's epistles offers a glimpse into his evangelical efforts to become more successful.

For an effective social communication one needs to be: (a) aware of his/her audience, and (b) make the message noticeable (Andreasen, 1995). And to notice something, one has to pay attention, which requires the skill to "capture" attention by something familiar and distinctive. This requires a link to familiar themes and values of the target audience. Perhaps it should be even entertaining and not too abstract. Once some people "got" the message, it rapidly spread.

Paul's athletic metaphors-images offered "optimism" and "hope" to those who were eager to improve their social position. They were not like the established upper class Athenians, satisfied with public displays of idolatry. The values suggested in such athletic references exhibited and emphasized *striving for excellence, always giving one's best, perseverance, faith in one's ultimate goal, and celebration of a new community of friends* – all an ideal "connection" to the message of Christian faith.

## 2.0 Procedure

Two steps were involved in gathering data for this work. The first consisted of gathering athletic metaphors from Paul's epistles in the New Testament. Scholars generally agree that only seven documents are authentically Pauline: Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and Philemon. The rest are post-Pauline or pseudo-Pauline attributed to him by later writers: Ephesians, Colossians, II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, and Titus. The letters were written in *Koine* = common Alexandrine Greek and at times Paul employed a scribe. For this work all thirteen documents were included.

The second step consisted of looking into *απασπάσματα* = fragmented references in various sources (books and articles) and engaging in a creative, critical analysis of such material. This effort is the first to place information stated in different places concerning Paul's images as a tool of evangelism.

## 3.0 Significance

Recent books and films, as well as political campaigns, have brought Jesus back into the public eye, but Paul whose epistles fill many pages in the New Testament has been for generations under a cloud of contempt from secular social movements. Nevertheless, the movement starting with a small Jewish sect, which Paul so fervently nourished and to which he devoted his entire life, spread with uncanny rapidity through the Greco-Roman world. Why? Paul's use of athletic images shows his un-paralleled, epistolographic communication skills, which were a significant key to his missionary success.

#### 4.0 Athletic Symbols

The 2012 Summer Olympic Games, officially known as the XXX Modern Olympiad, have been recently concluded in London, England (July 27 – August 12). Two distinctive historical features mark these games: a) London has now become the first city to officially host such an event three times, having previously done so in 1908 and in 1948; b) for the first time, every participating country entered at least one female athlete.

Modern Olympiads display a variety of emblems and symbols: mascots, flags, torchbearers, and anthems. Most prominent of such symbols are two: First, the five-ringed symbol, which represents the union of the five continents willing to engage in competitive games.



It was designed in 1913 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the French founder of Modern Games, and adopted in 1914. It was first displayed at the VII Olympiad (1920) at Antwerp, Belgium. The notion that these rings represent specific continents is most likely false, since the Olympic Charter makes no reference to such an idea. Most likely the idea they express appears to be that all parts of the world are now interlocked and thus brought together by the Olympic Movement. Considering the five colors, the Olympic Charter is once again not explicit. Nevertheless, many believe that – blue, black, red, yellow, and green on a white field are colors that exist in national flags participating in these games<sup>2</sup>.

The second distinctive symbol of Modern Olympiads is the *hendiatis* motto:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Citius, Altius, Fortius</b> Γρηγορότερα, Υψηλότερα, Δυνατότερα Faster, Higher, Stronger</p>
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The words are comparative adverbs not adjectives. The Latin and Greek usage makes the lexical significance of this figure of speech more evident. Again, de Coubertin proposed this motto in 1894, who borrowed it from his friend Henri Didon, a Dominican priest and avid sport enthusiast. The words were introduced at the VIII Olympiad (1924) in Paris, France<sup>3</sup>.

These three adverbs “capture” the aim and essence of any athlete’s endeavor as he or she prepares, spending countless hours, days, months, and years to face that critical moment standing at the starting line-up for the final race. Indeed it is very difficult for a non-athlete to comprehend the demanding practices, dietary restrictions, and mental discipline that athletes have to endure to reach victory and win a medal. The etymology of the word *athlete* derives from the Greek word *αθλητής* (*άθλειν* – verb = to contest and *άθλος* – noun = difficult contest). Also, the Greek word *αγών* means contest = an acute physical or mental struggle. Therefore, an athlete is a person who possesses or acquires such traits as

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<sup>2</sup> *The Olympic Charter*, published by the International Olympic Committee, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011, p. 9 - 20. The Charter and be viewed on the Internet at the following address: [http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic\\_charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf).

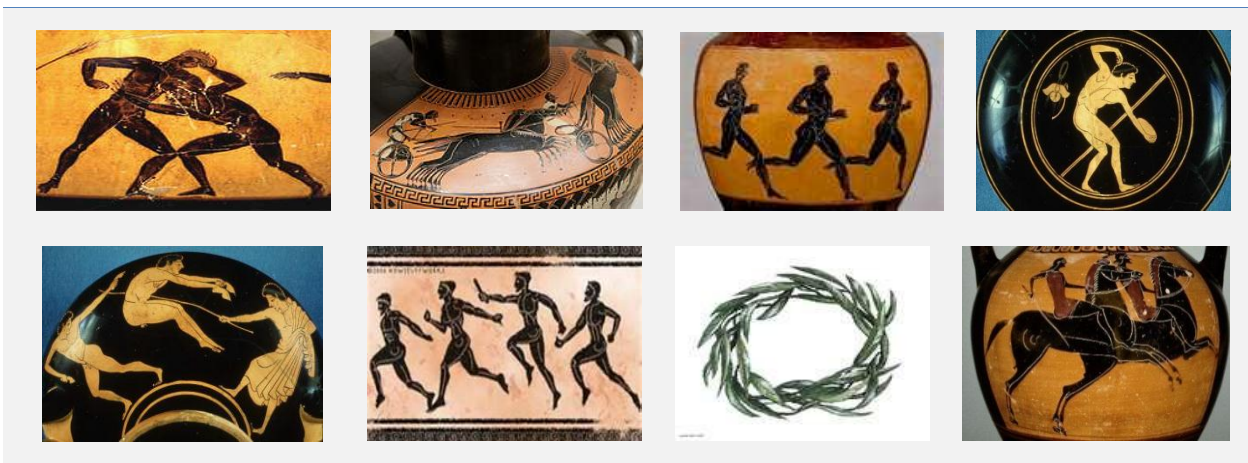
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20-21

agility, speed, endurance and strength necessary for performance in competitive contests in order to win a prize<sup>4</sup>.

In ancient Greece and during the Roman Empire there were many cities sponsoring “Pan-Hellenic” games (i.e., Παναθήναια in Athens, Υακίνθια in Sparta, Ολυμπιακοί in Dion, Ελευθέρια in Plataiaes); however, there were four urban centers, which with their corresponding Holy sanctuaries attracted many athletes when games were scheduled. The cities were: **Ολυμπία** (Olympia in Elis, Peloponessos), **Δελφοί** (Delphi), **Κόρινθος** (Corinth), and **Νεμέα** (Nemea). The religious, game ceremonies held in these cities were known as: **Ολύμπια** (Olympia), **Πύθια** (Pythia), **Ίσθμια** (Isthmia), and **Νέμεια** (Nemea).



Even though each site had its own particular ceremonial rituals and activities (i.e., the worship of Zeus at Olympia, Apollo at Pythia, Poseidon at Isthmia, and perhaps Hercules at Nemea, they all followed common institutional laws for the various contests. The accepted date of the first Olympics Games has been 786 BC. The Pythian and Isthmian Games started in 582 BC. Of significance for this discussion is the symbol that each athlete received when he was declared a victor (i.e., boxing, wrestling, long jump, foot-races, discus, chariot or horse racing, spear-throwing, archery, music and poetry contests).



At Olympia athletes received **κότινο της αγριελαίας** = a wreath made out of wild olive tree branches. The winners at Delphi received **δαφνόφυλλα** = a wreath of bay laurel, sacred to Apollo. At the Nemea Games, the judges who were dressed in black robes, as a symbol of mourning to honor the death of Opletes – a child of the priest of Zeus and Eurydice, crowned the athletes with a wreath made of parsley or a wild form of green celery. Those who were victorious at Isthmia, funeral ceremonial games, received originally a wreath of **μαραμμένο σέλινο** = withered, wilted celery and in later times was changed into a wreath of pine needles. In most games, however, a crown of palm was placed in the right hand of the victor. At times, athletes were also honored by a statue or with extra **drachmas** =

<sup>4</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969 and English Dictionary, Harper Collins, 2003.

money<sup>5</sup>. After nearly one thousand one hundred-seventy years, since the first Olympics took place, the Emperor Theodosius I (347 AD – 395 AD) in 394 AD or perhaps his grandson Theodosius II (401 AD – 450 AD) in 435 AD, as part of a campaign to impose Christianity as a state religion suppressed and abolished such games<sup>6</sup>.

One cannot as easily miss the fact that athletic references jump up from Paul's eloquent pen. And this is done so effortlessly and with such charm that several questions can be asked. Is the Christian life Paul is advocating, as an athletic contest, a conscious, metaphorical teaching method known to him from his early Hellenistic education as *νοῦς υγιής εν σώματι υγιές* = *mens sana in corpore sano* "a sound mind in a sound (healthy) body" or is it a thinking athlete who speaks a Christian language which fully expresses the inner essence of a person? Did the Apostle attend the Isthmian Games? Paul, after all, made so many references to athletic contests, especially in his letters to the Corinthians. For a possible answer, one needs a brief historical exploration of Paul's early life in Tarsus and the Corinthian, Isthmian Games.

## 5.0 Paul in Tarsus of Cilicia - Hellenic influence

Paul the Apostle (c. 6 or 7 AD – c. 67 AD) also known as Saul of Tarsus, is perhaps the most noted early Christian missionary. His epistles (Pauline letters) occupy a considerable portion of the New Testament. His travels spreading the Gospel to early Christian communities around the Mediterranean and his epistles left a considerable influence on Christian thinking<sup>7</sup>.

Tarsus was a port city built in the 7th century BC by Assyrians. It was a favorable site where the only decent passage across the Taurus Mountains in Asia Minor lies. Its harbor allowed the residents to engage in commercial and cultural interaction with various people around the eastern Mediterranean Sea. And, ever since Alexander's military expeditions against Persia, Tarsus along with many other cities received the impact of Hellenic educational ideals. What is significant to note is the fact that in ancient Greece, and nowhere else at that time, the ideal of *καλοῦ καί αγαθοῦ* = good and honest was an established method of teaching. The *gymnasia* were part of any cosmopolitan city and Tarsus had several such flourishing places where Greek philosophy, mental clarity/wisdom, and athletic exercise were the model for educating the young to become eventually productive citizens. (It was the mythological prototype of Achilles educated by Centaur Chiron). This standard expanded in all cities allowing citizens to encourage local games around religious sanctuaries honoring the patron god or goddess. No holy sanctuary existed in ancient Greece that did not combine its religious liturgical practices with the organization of athletic games<sup>8</sup>.

One day, perhaps in the year 6 or 7 AD, a little boy named Saul was born in Tarsus to Jewish parents of the tribe of Benjamin. He refers with pride to his hometown in Acts 21:39 "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of not so insignificant city." The fact that Tarsus was not an unimportant city can be confirmed by the following facts: It was the place where Marc Anthony met Cleopatra in October 41 BC; where Emperors Tacitus (ca. 200-276 AD) died and Julian (332-363 AD) was buried; where philosophers Artemidorus from Ephesus (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) and Diogenes from Sinope (412 BC – 323 BC) taught; and the place where the stoic thinker Athenodoros (74 BC - 7 AD born near Tarsus and mentor of Octavian, who later became Caesar Augustus) lived<sup>9</sup>.

Tarsus had a stadium and gymnasium at the banks of the river Cydnus. During the Roman times mention is made of four athletic celebrations that took place in Tarsus. Indeed, *Strabo* (ca. 64/63 BC – 24 AD historian and geographer) mentions a scandal involving misappropriation of funds and

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<sup>5</sup> Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece* 8.48.2, Volume III Books 6-8, translated by W.H.S. Jones, 1935 and Herodotus: *The Histories*, Book VIII *Urania*, 26.3, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Kotynski, Edward J., *The Athletics of the Ancient Olympics*, 2006, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, A. N. *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977, p. 113-200

<sup>8</sup> Γιαλούρης, 1991

<sup>9</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 3 volumes, translated by H.C. Hamilton, ed. H.G. Bohn, 1854-1857 Book XIV, 12-15

corruption, which had taken place few years before Paul's birth, by a man named Voetho – whom Marc Anthony had appointed as principal<sup>10</sup>.

In this town, perhaps a young Paul joined other 8-14 year old children, under the watchful eye of a **γυμναστή** = teacher/tutor, learning physical exercises and cultivating his intellectual skills. After all, his family most likely belonged to the city's prominent well-to-do social class. Paul, as an adult, Luke states, claimed that he was born a Roman citizen<sup>11</sup>. It is not clear how the family obtained such citizenship, perhaps his father was Roman or given the title *civis Romanus* for services rendered or purchased it for a large sum<sup>12</sup>. And we do not know how many members were in his family, although mention is made of a sister in the Acts 23:16. And since Tarsus was famous as a center of manufacturing and exporting tents, woven from the hair of the large long-haired black goats grazing on the slopes of maintain Taurus, Paul had learned that skill as well and used it as an adult earning a living as a tentmaker<sup>13</sup>.

In ancient Greece and subsequently during Roman times there were two forms of education: formal and informal. Informal education was provided by an unpaid teacher, and occurred in a non-public setting. Formal education was attained through attendance to a public school or was provided by a hired tutor. Of course, formal education was primarily for men, and was not offered to slaves, manual laborers, or women. Additionally, education focused heavily on training the entire person, which included education of the mind, body, and imagination. Pupils learned under three types of teachers: the **γραμματιστές** = *grammatistes*, grammarians who taught reading, writing, arithmetic and literature; **παιδοτρίβες** = *paidotribes* who coached wrestling, boxing, and gymnastics; and **κιθαρίστες** = *kitharistes* who taught music, especially singing and playing the lyre<sup>14</sup>.

As in so many other cities, so in Tarsus there was a Jewish community that preserved its customs and traditions, with the synagogue at the center of its cultural and religious life. Obviously Saul was taught the history of his ancestors and embraced the zeal by which the Pharisees piously followed the Mosaic Laws, as well as the resurrection of souls, and anticipation for a coming Messiah, who would liberate them from Roman rule and oppression<sup>15</sup>. He learned Greek, as it is evident from his written work and along with his Hellenic educational awareness he could distinguish all things Gentile from Jewish. Later as a young man, he was sent to Jerusalem to study alongside Gamaliel the Elder, a noted rabbi of his day<sup>16</sup>.

There is no concrete evidence that Paul as a young man participated in any games; however, it stands to reason to infer his love for the Greek contests as well as the Greek language – which he knew so well. At the wrestling gymnasium in Tarsus among the 8-14 year olds and later as a young man under the supervision of his teachers, Paul nurtured his body and mind. If not an active participant, perhaps small Saul (Paul) as a student of sports or as a fan! Making such an inference does not contradict the fact that a young Jewish boy, because of his Judaic faith, was prevented in participating in such physical exercises or games<sup>17</sup>.

Paul's use of athletic references/words is not merely a result of his childhood experiences, even though such early memories remain embedded for a long time in one's mind. In his apostolic and missionary travels, Paul visited many prominent cities (Salamis and Paphos in Cyprus; Ephesus and Antioch in Asia Minor; or Philippi, Thessaloniki, Athens, and Corinth in Greece) where Holy sanctuaries of the Greek

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Book XIV 5-14

<sup>11</sup> Acts 16: 37; 22: 27-28; 25: 10-11

<sup>12</sup> Hadjifoti, Litsa. *Saint Paul: His Journey through Greece, Cyprus, Asia Minor and Rome*, Editions M. Toubis S.A., Athens, 2004, p.6

<sup>13</sup> Pollock, John. *The Apostle: A life of Paul*, Chariot Victor Publishing: Book Communications, Ontario, 1966, p. 14-16

<sup>14</sup> Jaeger, W. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1945

<sup>15</sup> Mavromataki, Maria. *Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles: Journeys in Greece*, Published by Haitalis, Athens, 2003, p. 13-15

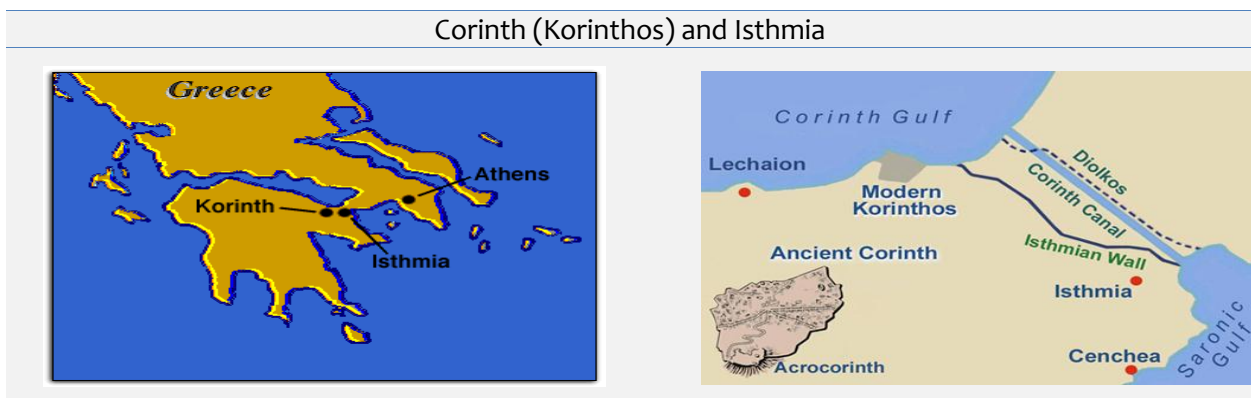
<sup>16</sup> Pollock, p. 17 and Hadjifoti, p. 7

<sup>17</sup> Harris, H. A., *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, Greenwood Press, 1979

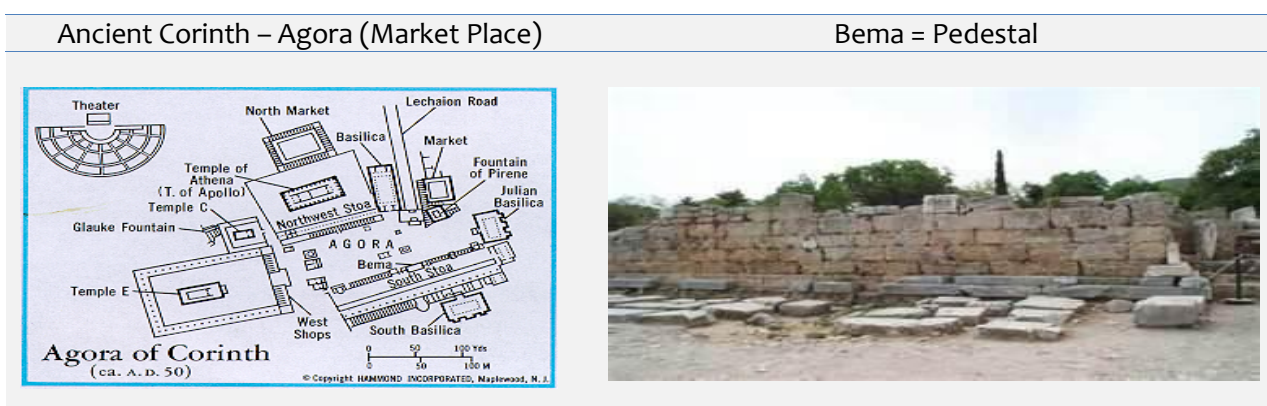
Pantheon existed and next to them were theaters, stadia, wrestling places, and gymnasiums. Notable is his experience in the theater/stadium of Ephesus<sup>18</sup>.

## 6.0 Paul in Corinth

Luke in Acts 18: 11 stated that Paul visited Corinth and remained in the city for eighteen months = **εκάθισέ τε ενιαυτόν και μήνας εξ**. Corinth is located about 50 miles/80 kilometers west of Athens, on a narrow isthmus that connects the southern section of Greece, known as Peloponnesus, to the Greek mainland. The Romans destroyed the original city about 146 B.C. However, Julius Caesar (100 BC – 44 BC) had it rebuilt and established as a Roman colony just over a hundred years later and under Caesar Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD) it grew to become the capital of the province of Achaea<sup>19</sup>.



Corinth owed much of its early success as a port to the fact that it was actually two ports - one to the Ionian and Adriatic Seas on the west side, and the other to the Aegean Sea on the east side, then separated only by the narrow isthmus. Ancient Corinthians attempted to cut a canal through the natural barrier, but the "technology" of the day (i.e. crude picks and shovels), was insufficient for such a task. Instead they constructed a slipway, called **δίολκος** = diolkos, where boats were brought up out of the water on one side and hauled overland on wooden rollers to the other side. Emperor Nero (37 AD – 68 AD) in 67 AD, made another attempt to dig a canal, but the project was abandoned after his assisted suicide (had a slave assist him). It was not until modern times, in 1893, that a canal was finally completed and opened by a Greek company<sup>20</sup>.



In Paul's time, Corinth had developed into a major government and commerce center of that region. It was a large cosmopolitan city, with an estimated mixed population of 400,000 people - Romans,

<sup>18</sup> Acts 19: 24-40

<sup>19</sup> Strabo, Geography

<sup>20</sup> The Countdown: Διώρυγα Κορίνθου <http://aedik.gr/frontend/articles.php?cid=44&scid=59>

Greeks, and Jews. Athens always led as the classic Greek city of intellectual and architectural wonders, but Corinth was where "real life" of the time happened. Lucius Junius Gallio Annaenus, son of the Orator Seneca the Elder and elder brother of Seneca the Younger (4 BC – 65 AD), was appointed proconsul around the time when Paul was active in Corinth. Archaeological and historical records of Roman times indicate that Gallio's tenure, as proconsul of the Province of Achaëa with Corinth its major city, was short 51 AD – 53 AD, due to failing health. Therefore the events described by Luke in Acts 18 can support the supposition that Paul was in Corinth during the same time. After all, Gallio was the proconsul, named in the Acts, who dismissed the charges brought by the Jews against Paul – most likely at the *Bema* = step, pedestal where Paul had to appear and offer his defense<sup>21</sup>.

As stated previously, Paul's first stay at Corinth lasted for eighteen months (Acts 18: 11), where he first met, lived, and worked with Aquila and Priscilla, who had been among the Jews expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius (10 BC – 54 AD) as stated in Acts 18: 2. Aquila, a Jew and native of Pontus, and his wife were tent makers, or rather tent-cloth makers = *σκηνοποιοί*. Paul moved in with them so they could work together. This allowed him to go to the synagogue every Sabbath to preach to the local Jews and God-fearers. Paul returned after a later missionary journey and remained for another three months in Corinth<sup>22</sup>.

Another person Paul met in Corinth was Erastus. In his letter to the Romans, most likely written from Corinth, Paul passed messages to the Christians in Rome. Among those sending messages was one "Erastus, who is the city's director of public works...send(s) his greetings<sup>23</sup>."



(In 1929 archaeologists excavating in Corinth in a paved square just east of the city's theater discovered a broken inscription dating to the second half of the 1st century AD, reading: "ERASTVS PRO AEDILIT[AT]E S P STRAVIT" ("Erastus, in return for his *aedileship*, laid [this pavement] at his own expense"). The Greek word is *οικονόμος* = treasurer, which appears in the original text, is the equivalent of the Latin *aedilis*<sup>24</sup>. An "*aedile*" is either a city engineer or chief of public works and there is every reason to believe that the Erastus in this inscription is the same person Paul referred to in his letter to the Romans<sup>25</sup>.

## 7.0 Isthmian Games

The Isthmian Games in Corinth were a festival of athletic and musical competitions in honor of the sea god Poseidon and were held in the spring of the second and fourth years of each Olympiad at the sanctuary of the Isthmus of Corinth. The Isthmian sanctuary is about 10 miles east of Corinth.

<sup>21</sup> Drane, John. *An Introduction to the Bible*, Lion, 1990, p. 634-635

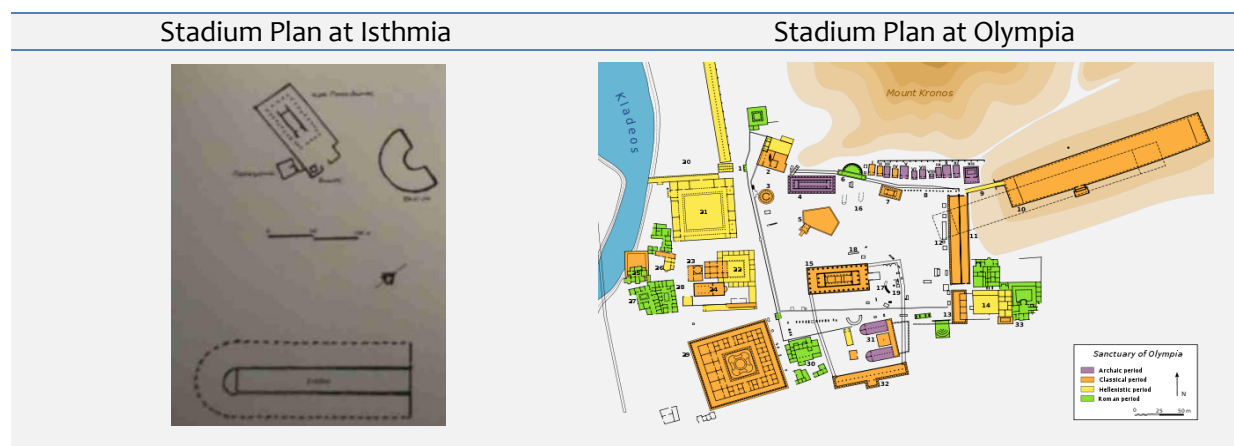
<sup>22</sup> Acts 20:3

<sup>23</sup> Romans 16:23

<sup>24</sup> Meinardus, Otto F. A., *St. Paul in Greece*, Lycabettus Press, Athens, 1972, p. 78-79

<sup>25</sup> Hadjifoti, p.108





Archaeological evidence of the site revealed that a large Doric temple dedicated to Poseidon was built at Isthmia around 700 BC. Since many travelers passed through on land and there were many ports nearby used by maritime traders, as a consequence both the temple and the site prospered. In many ways it rivaled those at Olympia in importance. Around 480 BC, fire destroyed the archaic temple. A new, larger temple was constructed about 465 BC, and the games resumed again. Throughout the next decades there were several conflicts in Greece but the games were held uninterruptedly. However, in 390 BC, the games were disrupted when a Spartan Army marched on the Isthmus. The temple was damaged again by fire, and because of economic trouble in Corinth, the damage took some time to repair. Therefore in comparison to the site at Olympia, the area remained less developed<sup>26</sup>.

Since the Isthmus was a main crossroad of merchants, traders and especially competing marching armies, the consequences were often disastrous to the site and the Temple. For example, throughout most of the third century the Macedonian kings used Corinth as one of their strategic garrisons. When they lost control over Corinth in 243 BC, to the Achaean League, they regained it in 228 BC. Later In 225-224 BC, the Macedonians brought yet another army through the Isthmus to face another Achaean force trying to take Corinth from them. Each time the site was devastated. When Rome arrived in 200 BC, to liberate Greece from Macedonian control, one of the garrisons they took was Corinth. The war against the Macedonians concluded in 196 BC, with a complete Roman victory. Before withdrawing his troops the Roman General Flamininus (229 BC – 174 BC) chose to make a political statement and a demonstration of Roman goodwill. He announced the complete liberation of Greece and chose to make this announcement during The Isthmian Games<sup>27</sup>.

Fifty years later the Romans were less magnanimous to Greece. After declaring war on the Achaean League, General Mummius decided to make another political statement in Corinth. In 144 BC, Mummius gave orders to destroy Corinth. All men were put to death and women and children were sold as slaves. The site at Isthmia was not spared. The Altar of Poseidon was destroyed, and the Isthmian Games were transferred to the control of Corinth's neighbor Sicyon. Corinth was later rebounded as a Roman Colony by Julius Caesar in 44 BC, and the city-state regained control of the games about forty years later; however, archeological evidence suggests that repairs continued until about 50 AD. At that time, the temple and the facilities for the games were repaired, and in 67 AD, the Emperor Nero took part in the Pan-Hellenic games held at Isthmia<sup>28</sup>.

By the end of the fourth century Christianity would be the only legally established religion in the Empire, and it is almost certain that no more games were given in honor of Poseidon. By 400 AD, the sanctuary to Poseidon was an abandoned. And in the reign of Theodosius I (347 AD – 395 AD) or Theodosius II (401 AD – 450 AD) most such pagan games were abolished. The site was often plundered for stone to construct other projects, the temple was torn down to its foundations, and the people

<sup>26</sup> *Excavations at Isthmia*, Ohio State University <http://isthmia.osu.edu/sanctuar.html>

<sup>27</sup> *Plutarch, Parallel Lives*: Loeb Classical Library Edition, 1921, Φλαμίνιος Χ, XI

<sup>28</sup> *Excavations at Isthmia*, Ohio State University <http://isthmia.osu.edu/sanctuar.html>

sporadically abandoned the site between the late 7th century and the 11th or 12th century AD. However, the Isthmus continued to be an important strategic location during the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods<sup>29</sup>.

## 8.0 Origin of Isthmian games

The Isthmian Games were Pan-Hellenic and were reputed to have originated as religious funeral games for Melicertes (also known as Palaemon). Sisyphus, the legendary founder and king of Corinth, instituted the Games. Ancient Corinthians believed, he discovered Melicertes' dead body and buried it on the Isthmus<sup>30</sup>. The Athenians believed that Theseus, legendary king of Athens, started these games to honor his victory over the Isthmus monster Sinis and expanded Melicertes' funeral games from a closed nightly rite into fully-fledged athletic-games and events which were dedicated to Poseidon - rivaling in popularity those in Olympia. Theseus arranged with the Corinthians for any Athenian visitors to the Isthmian games to be granted the privilege of front seats = **προεδρία**, *prohedria*<sup>31</sup>.

If we are to accept the traditional date of the first Olympics Games 776 BC, we can say that the first Isthmian Games would have been held in 582 BC. The games took place the year before (July) and one year after (May) of an Olympiad. Contests included: chariot races, pankration, foot races, wrestling, boxing, music, poetry, and painting competitions. Traditionally, the winners of these games received a wreath of **withered celery** and the judges wore black robes, symbols of the original religious funereal character. Later the wreath was altered and consisted of pine leaves. Victors could also be honored with money, a statue, or an ode<sup>32</sup>.

After the battle at Action 30 BC, a second series of contests were added to The Isthmian Games known as the Caesarian (Καυσάρεια). These games were taking place every four years as well and were known as the **Μείζονα Ἴσθμια** = Major Isthmian. Since the games' inception, Corinth had always been in control of them. When the Romans destroyed Corinth in 146 BC, The Isthmian Games continued, but were administered by Sicyon. When Caesar in 44 BC rebuilt Corinth, the city recovered ownership of the Games and thereafter flourished until Theodosius I or Theodosius II suppressed them as a pagan ritual.

The trial of Paul in Corinth, brought about by Jews accusing Paul of “persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law,” and the dismissal of such charges against him by the Roman proconsul Gallio, as well as the statement that he remained in the city for eighteen months, verify his presence in Corinth from the spring (May) of 50 AD to the fall of 51 AD. In July of 51 AD, contestants were participating at The Isthmian Games.

From archaeological records at Isthmia and Corinth the names of The Isthmian **Αγωνοθετών** from 3 AD – 181 AD, have been recorded. **Αγωνοθέτες** = *agonothetes* were noted, wealthy persons from prominent families who were the official financial sponsors, using their own resources, and organizers of the games. In 51 AD, **Αγωνοθέτης** of the games was L. Rutilius from a noted Corinthian family, and his son C. Rutilius was serving as the **Εισαγωγέας** = *Eisagogeas*. Individuals sponsoring such events gained additional prestige and standing, among the Corinthian elite community. Additionally, there were ten members of the organizing committee called **Ελληνοδίκες** = *Ellenodikes*, judges<sup>33</sup>.

Paul was therefore in Corinth when L. Rutilius was selected sponsor. Months before such games were scheduled, preparations were to be completed. The clay and ceramic workers had to construct in their kilns the famous Corinthian amphorae and the eastern, Anatolian weavers had to prepare the cloth for

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Gebhard, E. R. and M.W. Dickie, *Melikertes-Palaemon: Hero of the Isthmian Games*, Excavations, University of Chicago, <http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/isthmia/publications/melikertes-palaemon-hero/melikertes-palaemon-footnotes/>

<sup>31</sup> Solinus, Gaius Julius, *Wonders of the World* 7.14

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*: Loeb Classical Library Edition, 1921, *Life of Solon* 23.3

<sup>33</sup> Broneer, Oscar. “Paul and Pagan Cults at Isthmia,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 6 169-187, 1971

the tents to house visitors coming from many Mediterranean cities. Perhaps, one can infer, this might have been one reason why Paul did not remain in Athens as long waiting for his companions Timothy and Silas to return from Macedonia<sup>34</sup>. The large crowds gathering in Corinth and Isthmia offered him and his companions an excellent opportunity to secure funds as tent makers and at the same time spread the evangelical message to a working class audience – not the intellectual elites he met in Athens. Besides his craft, profession as a tent-maker was for him a source of pride. Not only it brought him an income, but he used it to boast he never relied on alms from others during his missionary life... *νυκτός γαρ και ημέρας εργαζόμενοι προς το μη επιβαρῆσαι τινα υμῶν* <sup>35</sup>. Thus, Paul can be characterized as a rugged, self-reliant individualist who accepted personal responsibility for his actions and life. Now, since most Corinthian Jews “rejected” his teachings – we are told that only Crispus, the synagogue president and his household was baptized - Paul turned to other God-fearing people that included dock workers, sailors, innkeepers, and other disadvantaged groups exploited by a ruling class. In fact, Paul “shifted” his pneumatic message from a “risen from the dead” Christ, which he used to the Athenian intellectuals, and placed emphasis on the “liberation” provided by a resurrected Christ. For a middle-class and working Corinthian audience, oppressed by Roman rule, such an appeal was more effective if one uses as a major symbol of success the people he converted in the two cities (Athens vs. Corinth). Also, in his II letter to the Corinthians 5: 17, Paul used the phrase *εις τις εν Χριστώ είναι* = being in Christ or living in Christ is a liberated creature<sup>36</sup>. Additionally, he reminded the Romans *ούτος οι πολλοί εν σώμα έσμεν, εν Χριστώ* = so we, being many, are one body in Christ and everyone members one of another<sup>37</sup>. And to the Colossians, chapter 1: 26-27, he spoke of *το μυστήριον το αποκεκρυμμένον από των αιώνων και από των γενεών, νυνί δε εφανερώθη τοις αγίοις αυτού, οίς ηθέλησεν ο Θεός γνωρίσαι τις ο πλούτος της δόξης του μυστηρίου τούτου εν τοις έθνεσιν, ός έστι Χριστός έν υμίν, η ελπίς της δόξης* = the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but is made manifest to his saints... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory<sup>38</sup>. Paul was preaching “hope” and “change.”

The fact that Paul's message “shifted” can be extrapolated from his own letters. From I Thessalonians to II Corinthians his evangelical message underwent a significant development. In his early letters he taught that the resurrected Christ will soon appear. His *παρουσία* = parousia, appearance (re-appearance) was imminent and all the followers will live to experience it. However, as the occurrence of natural deaths among many church members became more and more evident, Paul had to promise the faithful the “hope” of witnessing the second coming and sharing in the Messianic dream and Christ's reign. Furthermore, he explained to the Corinthians that this coming resurrection will be made manifest and the dead bodies of those Christians who passed away will rise as spirits and that the bodies of the living would be changed from flesh to spirit. Paul described this process as “liberating<sup>39</sup>.”

Ο δέ Κύριος το Πνεύμα έστιν, ού δέ το Πνεύμα Κυρίου, εκεί *ελευθερία...*

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is **freedom...**

II Corinthians 3: 17

Paul's work also provided him an opportunity to preach among his fellow trades-people. Clubs or guilds were among the social units at this time, and cloth-leather workers, like Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, would have belonged to such an association, which served the double function of providing business contacts and fellowship. Certainly, the church at Corinth included many trades-people who worked with Paul during his stay<sup>40</sup>. Paul did not address the brains of the Corinthians (intellectualism), he addressed their

<sup>34</sup> Acts 17: 16-18 and I Thessalonians 3: 1-2

<sup>35</sup> I Thessalonians 2: 9. Only noted exception was the assistance he received from Philipians.

<sup>36</sup> Grossan, John D. and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2004, p. 278-279

<sup>37</sup> Romans 12: 5

<sup>38</sup> Webb, Eugene, *World View and Mind*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2009, p. 208 -209

<sup>39</sup> Buck, Charles and Greer Taylor, *Saint Paul: A Study in the Development of his Thought*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1969

<sup>40</sup> The account of Paul's first stay in Corinth is found in Acts 18: 1-17

hearts (practical concerns). And the use of athletic references made it easier for those every-day folks to identify with his message.

## 9.0 Paul's athletic references

It appears that Paul's physical appearance was that of a small, slender man. However, that did not prevent him from being not only an athlete in spirit but also an athlete with the body of a long distance runner. This becomes obvious from his modest boast to the Corinthians when he stated:

...εν κόποις περισσοτέρως, εν πληγαίς υπερβαλλόντως, εν φυλακαίς περισσοτέρως, εν θανάτοις πολλάκις, υπό Ιουδαίων πεντάκις τεσσαράκοντα παρά μίαν έλαβον, τρις ερραβδίσθην, άπαξ ελιθάρσθην, τρις εναυάγησα, νυχθημερόν εν τω βυθώ πεποίηκα, οδοιπορίαίς πολλάκις κινδύνοις ποταμών, κινδύνοις ληστών, κινδύνοις εκ γένους, κινδύνοις εξ εθνών, κινδύνοις εν πόλει, κινδύνοις εν ερημία, κινδύνοις εν θαλάσση, κινδύνοις εν ψευδαδέλθοις, κόπω και μόχθω, εν αγρυπνίαίς πολλάκις, εν λιμώ και δίψει, εν ψύχει και γυμνότητι...

...in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths more often; of the Jews five times received forty stripes save one, thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in wariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and in thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness... II Corinthians 11: 23-27

A person who states such facts is not necessarily an armchair philosopher or an idle man sitting in the stands. Paul's smaller body frame was suitable, as any practicing athlete can verify, as the body of a long distance runner. During his many travels in so many distant places, he exhibited a persistent dedication spreading the Christian message. He ran **ούκ αδήλως** = not as uncertainly (I Corinthians 9: 26) and **ουχι εις κενόν** = not in vain (Galatians 2: 2).

The verses, where these two phrases appear, make the point most evident:

Ancient Greek

... ουκ οίδατε ότι οι εν σταδίω τρέχοντες πάντες μεν τρέχουσιν, εις δε λαμβάνει το βραβείον; ούτω τρέχετε, ίνα καταλάβητε. Πας δε ο αγωνιζόμενος πάντα εγκρατεύεται, εκείνοι μεν ούν ίνα φθαρτόν στέφανον λάβωσιν, ημεις δε άφθαρτον. Εγώ τοίνυν ούτε **τρέχω**, ως **ούκ αδήλως**, ούτω πυκτεύω, ως ούκ αέρα δέρων, αλλ' υπωπιάζω μου το σώμα και δουλαγωγώ μήπως άλλοις κηρύξας αυτός αδόκιμος γένωμαι.

Modern Greek

...δεν ξέρετε ότι οι δρομείς στο στάδιο τρέχουν όλοι, ένας όμως παίρνει το βραβείο. Τρέχετε, λοιπόν, κι εσεις ώστε να κατακτήσετε το βραβείο. Οι αθλητές που ετοιμάζονται για τον αγώνα, υποβάλλονται σε κάθε είδους αποχή για να λάβουν εκείνοι ένα στεφάνι μαραμένο (που μαραίνεται), εμεις όμως ένα αμάραντο. Εγώ, λοιπόν, έτσι **τρέχω**, με τα μάτια **στηλωμένα στο τέρμα**. Έτσι πυγμαχώ, όχι σαν κάποιον που δίνει γροθιές στον αέρα. Αλλά με σκληρές ασκήσεις ταλαιπωρώ το σώμα μου και το υποδουλώνω, απο φόβο μήπως, ενώ θα έχω κηρύξει στους άλλους, εγώ ο ίδιος κριθώ ακατάλληλος.

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receives the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that strives for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now, they do it to obtain a corruptible (withered) crown (wreath); but we an in-corruptible. I therefore so run, **not uncertainly**; so I fight (box), not as one that beats the air (shadow boxing). But I keep under my

body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (judged unprepared). I Corinthians 9: 24-27

...ἀνέβην δε κατά αποκάλυψιν και ανεθέμην αυτοίς το ευαγγέλιον ο κηρύσσω εν τοις έθνεσι, κατ'ιδίαν δε τοις δοκούσι, μήπως εις κενόν τρέχω ή έδαμον...και **ουχί εις κενόν**

...and I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, **in vain**... Galatians 2: 2

He trained and ran his “race” with this philosophy in mind **δαπανήσω και εκδαπανηθήσομαι** = spend and be spent.

...εγώ δε ήδιστα **δαπανήσω και εκδαπανηθήσομαι** υπέρ των ψυχών υμων..

...and I will gladly spend and be spent for your souls... II Corinthians 12: 15

Also, he ran his “race” with this in mind **ως τελεώσαι τον δρόμον μου** = finish the race and reached, with unshaken determination and joy, his ultimate goal.

...αλλά ουδενός λόγον ποιούμαι ουδέ έχω την ψυχήν μου ημίαν εμαυτώ, **ως τελεώσαι τον δρόμον μου μετα χαράς**...

...but none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might **finish my course** with joy... Acts 20: 24

This is why he used the following athletic verbs, when he wrote to Timothy to inform him of his life's work, and confidently proclaimed that when the time came to leave this life = **αναλύσεως**, a naval term (weighed anchor), meaning the lifting the ropes to free the boat from the moor for sailing, **ηγώνισμαι, τετήρηκα, τετέλεκα**.

...Εγώ γαρ ήδη σπένδομαι, και ο καιρός της εμής **αναλύσεως** εφέστηκε, τον αγώνα τον καλόν **ηγώνισμαι**, τον δρόμον **τετέλεκα**, την πίστιν **τετήρηκα**. Λοιπόν απόκειται μοι ο της δικαιοσύνης στέφανος, όν αποδώσει μοι ο Κύριος εν εκείνη την ημέρα, ο δίκαιος κριτής...  
...έφτασε ο καιρός να φύγω απο τον κόσμο. Αγωνίστηκα τον ωραίο αγώνα, έτρεξα το δρόμο ως το τέλος, φύλαξα την πίστη. Τώρα πια με περιμένει το στεφάνι της δικαιοσύνης, που μ'αυτό θα με ανταμείψει ο Κύριος εκείνη την ημέρα, ο δίκαιος κριτής...

For I am now ready to be offered, and the **time of my departure is at hand**. I have **fought** a good fight, I have **finished my course**, I have **kept the faith**. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day. II Timothy 4: 6-8

The verb **ηγώνισμαι** suggests the nature of his ministry and his efforts to spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean territories. The verb **τετήρηκα** emphasizes the legitimacy of his efforts/struggles until the end of his “race.” And the verb **τετέλεκα** establishes the dignified worthiness of having finished his race<sup>41</sup>. As a long distance runner (marathoner) does without quitting at the 24th or 25th mile of such an agonizing or grueling race.

In the spring of 50 AD, Paul was in Corinth, one of the most cosmopolitan centers of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, working with his companions as a tent maker to supply and sell his merchandize to those who needed it for the coming, spring 51 AD Isthmian Games. Such tents were much in demand

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<sup>41</sup> Αγγελάτος, Μ. “Το Αρχαίο Αθλητικό Ιδεώδες και η Αθλητική Γλώσσα του Αποστόλου Παύλου,” <http://www.gec.gr/astir/joul2004.htm>

and needed for there were no permanent facilities to house many visitors or athletes. This can be verified by the fact that only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, under the **αρχιερέα** = chief priest of the Poseidon sanctuary P. Licinius Priscus Iuventianus, a scheduled construction program was instituted and financed to build permanent, public housing for visitors and athletes at Isthmia<sup>42</sup>.

Luke in the Acts did not enlighten us in detail of Paul's activities in Corinth. He simply states that Paul **έπειθέ τε Ιουδαίους και Έλληνας** = persuaded Jews and Greeks<sup>43</sup>. However, since he remained in the city for more than a year, one can with some degree of certainty infer the following point: Paul must have visited Isthmia several times. And as he and his companions were walking eastward from Corinth through the gentle, rolling hillsides on their way to the sanctuary he preached to them or to others willing to listen. And in his pronouncements, he must have used athletic images familiar to the Corinthians. The usage of such words not only enhanced his message by providing colorful imagery, it probably made the audience listen to him more attentively because they could easily relate to this type of speech.

Perhaps with Aquila and Priscilla, Timothy, Luke, Silas, Stefana, or Erasto as they were watching the runners, jumpers, and all the other athletes he probably offered many comparative analogies and references to athletic contests. How else, if he was not there could he know that winners at Isthmia were given a **φθαρτό στεφάνι** = withered wreath and express the comparative **ούτοι μεν...ημείς δε** (now, **they** do it to obtain a corruptible crown... but **we** an in-corruptible one) or the wreaths given by **δίκαιοι κριταί** = righteous judges<sup>44</sup>. This type of juxtaposition indeed forces the believers and the faithful to turn their thoughts to the spiritual lessons they received from their Heavenly Father for their "athletic" participation in the "good fight" of faith and their **ανωτερότητα** = superior performance in reference to all others. (I Timothy 6: 12) And, of course, the **withered wreath** is a metaphorical symbol of something worthless in comparison to the **άφθαρτο** = non-withered and always fresh crown not given by a human hands but from a righteous judge, the Lord Christ<sup>45</sup>.

Also, the phrase **μη πως άλλοις κηρύξας, αυτός αδόκιμος γένωμαι** = could it be as I preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (found unprepared) is indicative of Paul's syllogism suggesting that as he watched judges at Isthmia announcing the victories of others-without them being the winners themselves, he himself ran the risk as he preached to others of losing the prize for himself.

When Paul reassured the Corinthians about Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of human souls, he made the following reference...

Καθ' ημέραν αποθνήσκω, νη την υμετέραν καύχησιν ήν έχω εν Χριστώ Ιησού τω Κυρίω ημών, ει κατάάνθρωπον **εθηριομάχησα** εν Εφέσω τι μοι το όφελος?

Αντικρίζω, αδελφοί μου, τον θάνατο κάθε μέρα – μα την κά'θχηση που έχω εξαιτίας σας στο έργο του Κυρίου μας Ιησού Χριστού. Αν ήταν ανθρώπινα τα κίνητρα της πάλης μου με τα θηρία στην Έφεσο, ποió ήταν το κέρδος μου?

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? And why stand we in jeopardy every hour? I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If after the manner of men, I have **fought/wrestled** with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? I Corinthians 15: 29-32.

When he discussed the assistance of the Lord in spreading the gospel's "good news," he reminded the Corinthians that the faithful are **διωκόμενοι αλλ' ούκ εγκαταλειπόμενοι, καταβαλλόμενοι αλλ' ούκ απολλύμενοι** = μας καταδιώκουν, ο Θεός όμως δεν μας εγκαταλείπει, μας **ρίχνουν** κατω, μα δεν

<sup>42</sup> *Inscriptions* IV, No. 203

<sup>43</sup> Acts 18: 4

<sup>44</sup> I Corinthians 9: 25

<sup>45</sup> Αγγελάτος, 2004

χάνουμε τον αγώνα = persecuted, but not forsaken; **cast down** (as in a wrestling match), but not **defeated/destroyed** (as in getting up again to continue the match)<sup>46</sup>. Also, in Chapter 5, verse 9 Paul pointed out the ephemeral, daily walk toward the demise of our earthly bodies and the eternal, heavenly house that awaits us prepared by our Lord **διό και φιλοτιμούμεθα, είτε ενδημούντες είτε εκδημούντες, ευάρεστοι αυτώ είναι** = γι'αυτό και αγωνιζόμαστε με ζήλο, για να είμαστε ευάρεστοι στο Θεό = wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him. And in verse 10 of the same chapter **τούς γαρ πάντας ημάς φανερωθήναι δει έμπροσθεν του βήματος του Χριστού** = for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, a reference to the **pedestal** where athletes had to stand to receive their awards. Additionally, he instructs the Corinthians in Chapter 10 verse 4 that while the faithful live in a secular world, they do not fight with worldly weapons **τα γαρ όπλα της στρατείας ημών ου σαρκικά, αλλά δυνατά τω Θεώ προς καθαίρεισιν οχθρωμάτων** = for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to pulling down of strong holds. Perhaps a reference to an ancient, athletic mythology that upon the return of an Olympic or Isthmian winner the citizens of the city, on occasion to honor the athlete, they did tear down a portion of their city's walls.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul stated that the Jews failed to recognize the Lord; however, their failure made it possible for other nations to receive the Lord's message **λέγω ούν, μη έπταισαν ίνα πέσωσι; μή γένοιτο αλλά τω αυτών παραπτώματι η σωτηρία τοις έθνεσιν είς το παραζηλώσαι αυτούς. Εί δε το παράπτωμα αυτών πλούτος κόσμου και το ήττημα αυτών πλούτος εθνών** = I say then, have they stumbled that should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles. The Greek noun **ήττα** refers to a defeat in an athletic contest, when an athlete stumbles and falls and therefore loses the race.

Similarly athletic references are tastefully found in his epistle to the Thessalonians, whom he loved and cared about a great deal. Paul reminded the city faithful that **εν πολλώ αγώνι**= with much contention I preached among you the gospel. While he and his companions were **προσπαθόντες**=engaged in this contests, others in Philippi and Thessaloniki **υβρισθέντες ημάς** = sword (cursed) at us. Furthermore, he pointed out that they should be **αποβλέποντες** = looking forward, as any athlete does, to receive **ένα στεφάνι** = the wreath. Not the withered and ephemeral but the one the Lord has given them.

... τίς γαρ ημών ελπίς ή χαρά ή στέφανος καυχήσεως...

...for what is our hope or joy or crown of rejoicing... I Thessalonians 2: 2, 19

At the end of the epistle, Paul urged the Thessalonians **το Πνεύμα μη σβήννυτε** = do not extinguish the **flame** of the graces given to you by the Holy Spirit<sup>47</sup>. Yet another metaphorical reference to Poseidon's sanctuary "flame" at Isthmia, and that of Zeus at Olympia as well.

In *Ephesians* Paul encouraged his brethren to put on the armor of God, so they may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil because **ουκ έστιν ημίν η πάλη προς αίμα και σάρκα, αλλά προς τας αρχάς προς τας εξουσίας προς τούς κοσμοκράτορας του σκότους του αιώνος τούτου** = for we **wrestle** not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world. Yet another athletic image in reference to wrestling a contest that demands from each Christian exceptional stamina and strength<sup>48</sup>.

In *Philippians* Paul assured the faithful that it is his **χαρά και στέφανος** = joy and crown/wreath when they **στήκετε εν Κυρίω** = stand fast in the Lord<sup>49</sup>. Because he also **αγωνίστηκε** = much engaged in contests on their behalf, he reminded them of this and encouraged them to engage in the same type of contests **τον αυτόν αγώνα έχοντες, οίον είδατε εν εμοί και νυν ακούετε εν εμοί** = having the same

<sup>46</sup> II Corinthians 4: 9

<sup>47</sup> I Thessalonians 5: 19

<sup>48</sup> Ephesians 6: 12

<sup>49</sup> Philippians 4: 1

conflict/contest which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me<sup>50</sup>. Additionally, as he pointed out to the Galatians, Paul reminded the Philippians that **ὅτι ουκ εις κενόν ἔδραμον ουδέ εις κενόν εκοπίασα** = that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain<sup>51</sup>. Paul advanced his argument of his faith in Christ by the following...

...ουχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη **τετελειώμαι**. Διώκω δε ει και καταλάβω, εφ'ω και κατελήφθην υπό του Χριστου Ιησου. Αδελφοί, εγώ εμαυτόν ούπω λογιζομαι **κατειληφέναι** εν δε τα μεν οπίσω επιλανθανόμενος τοις δε ἔμπροσθεν επεκτεινόμενος κατά σκοπόν διώκω επι το **βραβείον** της άνω κλήσεως του Θεου εν Χριστώ Ιησου...

...δεν ισχυρίζομαι βέβαια ὅτι ἔφτασα ἤδη στο **τέρμα**, ούτε ὅτι ἔγινα τέλειος. Συνεχίζω ὁμως τον αγώνα για να κερδίσω αυτό το βραβείο για το οποίο ἤδη με κέρδισε ο Ιησους Χριστός. Αδελφοί μου, εγώ δε θεωρώ τον εαυτό μου ὅτι ἔφτασα στό **τέρμα** σ'ένα ὁμως πράγμα συγκεντρώνω την προσοχή μου, ξεχνώ το **δρόμο** που διέτρεξα και προχωρώ σ'αυτόν που βρίσκεται μπροστά μου. **Αγωνίζομαι να τερματίσω** και να προσβλέπω στο **βραβείο** της ουράνιας πρόσκλησης του Θεού μέσω του Ιησου Χριστου...

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those things that are before. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 3: 12-14)

Indeed the English verb *attained* and *apprehend* does not do justice to the Greek words. The athletic references are very evident in the ancient text. Another poor translation of words can be found at the end of the epistle. Paul refers to his companions as **συναθλητές** = co-athletes, teammates; however, the English version uses the nouns *yoke-fellows* and *fellow-laborers*, (co-workers) words without the original meaning suggested by Paul. The original text reads: ... **Ευοδίαν και Συντύχη...αίτινες εν τω ευαγγελίω συνήθλησαν μοι μετά Κλήμενος και των λοιπών συνεργών...**= Euodias and Syntyche...and I entreat thee also, true yoke-fellows, help those women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other fellow-laborers<sup>52</sup>. When Paul wishes to use the word *co-laborer* or *fellow-laborer*, he uses the Greek word **συνεργάτης** as in the case of Philemon. He states **Φιλήμονι τω αγαπητώ και συνεργώ ημών** = our dearly beloved Philemon and fellow-laborer<sup>53</sup>.

Paul wished the Colossians to know = **θέλω γαρ υμάς ειδέναι** and reminded them that he **ηλίκον αγώνα έχω περί υμών** = is engaged in a great conflict/contest for them at Laodicea and for many of them that have not known him personally<sup>54</sup>. Furthermore, he stated **κοπιώ αγωνιζόμενος κατά την ενέργειαν αυτού την ενεργουμένην εν εμοί εν δυνάμει** = whereunto I also labor, striving according to His working, which worked in me mightily (Colossians 1: 29) having close to him his co-athlete and a compatriot to them Epaphras, who is **πάντοτε αγωνιζόμενος υπέρ υμών** = always laboring for them so they can **σταθώσι τέλειοι** = stand perfect and complete in all the will of God<sup>55</sup>. And because they have fought in the arena of the Christian faith, life and service, Paul draws their attention to the fact that they should be careful about those **ευσεβοφανείς** = who appear to be faithful and try to inspire them toward a misleading religious life. **Μηδείς υμάς καταβραβευτέω** = let no man beguile you of your reward<sup>56</sup>. With such a phrase he cautioned and warned them. In fact, he used a very rare Greek verb **καταβραβευτέω**

<sup>50</sup> Philippians 1: 30

<sup>51</sup> Philippians 2: 16

<sup>52</sup> Philippians 4: 2-3

<sup>53</sup> Philemon 1: 2

<sup>54</sup> Colossians 2: 1

<sup>55</sup> Colossians 4: 12

<sup>56</sup> Colossians 2: 18



taken from the noun name **Βραβεύς**, which means the person who bestows awards to the victors of sport games. In other words, be careful lest anyone denies you the prize that belongs to you<sup>57</sup>.

It can be stated, with some certainty, that Paul was a tireless Evangelical “runner” from the start of his first missionary activity in 46 AD to his incarceration in 67 AD. It was a marathon, endurance “race,” a rocky road, and a biography of a champion of the Christian spirit. He states in Hebrews 12:1 **δι’ υπομονής τρέχουμεν τον προκειμενον ημίν αγώνα** = with patience we are running the race that is set before us. And as he enters the home straight, the last meters in the arena of Christian faith to triumphantly cut the ribbon he shouts in a loud voice **ηγώνισμαι...τετήρηκα...τετέλεκα** = I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. And now, the Holy Lord will bestow upon me the **αμάραντο** = the not withered wreath/crown<sup>58</sup>.

But before that he felt the need - as is the case with every genuine athlete - to pass the baton to someone else who will continue the race after him. This person is Timothy to whom Paul wrote his first epistle during the winter of 66 or 67 AD, and the second epistle from his jail cell in Rome during the spring of 67 AD. Scholarly debate questions whether the epistles to Timothy were written by Paul, nevertheless athletic images can be found in these letters. Perhaps that can be some proof that these letters were Pauline as well<sup>59</sup>.

Paul instructed Timothy **γύμναζε δε σεαυτόν πρός ευσέβειαν** = exercise thyself rather unto godliness (I Timothy 4:7), **αγωνίζου τον καλόν αγώνα της πίστεως** = fight the good fight of faith (I Timothy 6: 12), and follow the rules **εάν δε και αθλή τις, ού στεφανούται εάν μη νομίμως αθλήση** = if an athlete strives for mastery, he will not be given the wreath/crown, unless he strives lawfully. (II Timothy 2: 5) These are not merely figures of speech, but practical athletic images and references to inspire his fellow co-athlete and brother in Christ.

## 10.0 Conclusion

Returning to the question stated in the beginning; is Paul’s advocacy, that the Christian life as an athletic contest, a conscious, metaphorical teaching method known to him from his early Hellenistic education or is it a thinking athlete who speaks a Christian language which fully expresses the inner essence of a faithful person? The answer should be without any reservation, affirmatively yes to both parts. Paul has been an athlete. Not only his writings confirm this fact, but also archaeological and historical evidence contributes to this assertion.

He was a contestant in the arena of spiritual life and service **εγκρατευόμενος κατά πάντα** = run all (I Corinthians 9: 25), and his participation in all his matches was undoubtedly clean of any wrongdoing or cheating. It was legitimate. (II Timothy 2:5) He was also a contestant in the arena of physical exercise and delivered, with his **υπωπιάζω μου το σώμα και δουλαγωγώ** = keep my body and subject it under strenuous exercises, the standard ideal of Christian life and service. (I Corinthians 9: 27) What he saw and lived in Tarsus, the Hellenistic education, traveling to places with Hellenistic influences, shrines and stadia and more specifically the stay in Corinth, gave him the ability to see, to judge and to contrast circumstances. At the end, confidently asserts that his fight was not for flesh and blood (Ephesians 6: 12) and that his spiritual and physical effort and road was not in vain. (Philippians 2: 16) Undoubtedly, on the Isthmian and Olympic list of spiritual athletes, the Apostle Paul was totally at the cutting edge. He was one among the best!

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<sup>57</sup> Αγγελάτος, 2004

<sup>58</sup> II Timothy 4: 6-8

<sup>59</sup> Αγγελάτος, 2004

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